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SUBJECT: CHAVEZ' REFORM PACKAGE PASSES SECOND READING

REF: CARACAS 01804

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT R. DOWNES  
FOR REASON 1.4 (D)

11. (SBU) The National Assembly (NA) overwhelmingly approved President Chavez' constitutional reform package during the second of three readings on September 11, bringing it one step closer to passage and a national referendum tentatively scheduled for early December. The proposed changes, however, were ardently contested by Podemos, a small but prominent pro-Chavez political party (Reftel). Specifically, Ismael Garcia of Podemos criticized Chavez' "new geometry of power," as another attempt to concentrate more power in the hands of the president at the expense of local governments. Furthermore, Garcia disputed amendments that would grant Chavez the sole authority to name governing officials to newly created federal provinces, territories, and cities. Chavista deputies dismissed Garcia's remarks and that of other Podemos deputies, saying Podemos' position coincided with that of opposition parties.

12. (C) On September 10, leaders from Primero Justicia (PJ), the second largest opposition party, Accion Democratica (AD), and the left-wing Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) met with the NA's Constitutional Commission to voice their concerns about the constitutional reform and to present their own slate of proposals. PJ Secretary General Carlos Ocariz told Poloff September 11 that opposition leaders were politely received by the Commission. Nevertheless, he doubted the NA would incorporate any of the points raised in the meeting before the third and final reading, which is scheduled for early November.

13. (SBU) Following the Commission's meeting with opposition parties, president of the NA Cilia Flores told the press that several other articles "connected" to the reform package might need to be revisited as well, including lowering the voting age from 18 to 16 years. The change would add over one million new voters to the registry lists if adopted. (Note: Currently, over 1.5 million eligible Venezuelan voters have not registered with the National Electoral Council (CNE). It is unlikely that the CNE will be able to process these individuals before October 2, the cut-off date announced by the CNE to register for the referendum. End Note.) Flores argued that the change would lead to increased "popular" participation, a primary objective of Chavez' "socialist" plans. Flores argued that the NA can propose additions to the reform but only the Venezuelan president can include them for discussion. Regarding the referendum, CNE President Tibisay Lucena predicted it would take place on December 9.

4. (C) Comment: President Chavez' constitutional reform package is going ahead as scheduled. While Podemos' dissent is noteworthy, it is unlikely that it can put brakes on the reform project. Meanwhile, opposition parties remain divided and despite lessons learned, some continue to advocate abstention, especially AD. Without a coordinated strategy and quicker action, the opposition will likely remain marginal actors during Chavez' constitutional "reform" process.

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